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Water released from reservoirs
Three in Indiana are near their maximum levels.
Mark Jewell
of The Associated Press

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Managers of Indiana's flood-control dams are playing a delicate balancing act, releasing water from nearly full reservoirs to the extent they can without endangering downstream communities.

Three northern Indiana reservoirs that regulate the flow of the Wabash River were within a few feet of their maximum levels Thursday.

But an official with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which manages the flood-control projects, said he saw little or no chance of water overwhelming the system and forcing managers to release a dangerous surge downstream.

Steve Rager, the corps' emergency manager for a multistate district based in Louisville, Ky., cited receding waters in northeastern Indiana and forecasts of drier weather the next few days.

"That will buy us some time to dry out," Rager said.

However, as a precaution, authorities in Huntington on Thursday were planning for the possibility that low-lying areas would need to be evacuated. That could occur if the level of J. Edward Roush Lake rises to the point that water must be released at a faster rate to avoid a reservoir overflow.

The reservoir, which feeds into the Wabash River, was at 798 feet above sea level Thursday - about 50 feet above the normal summer level and 2 feet below the level considered the maximum.

The reservoir has risen about 10 feet since Tuesday, when corps officials gradually began releasing water at a rate designed to avoid inundating downstream areas with a flood surge.

"We don't want to create problems for the people in Terre Haute and Vincennes," he said.

As long as reservoirs remain at or near maximum levels, a bad turn in the weather could force dam

managers to make some tough choices, said Al Shipe, a National Weather Service hydrologist in Indianapolis.

"Until they get their projects to where they have some unused storage capacity in them, there is always that danger," Shipe said.

Corps officials were working Thursday to calculate the extent to which the dams have limited flood damage since Indiana was hit by a string of thunderstorms beginning late last week.

Human intervention is no cure-all for flooding, as was shown during disastrous Mississippi River floods in 1993 that occurred despite a system of levees, flood plains and river-control structures.

Rager said Indiana's flood-control dams have more than paid for themselves when measured against the savings from limiting flood damage.

The dam at Roush Lake and two others on reservoirs to the west - Salamonie Lake and Mississinewa Lake - were built in the late 1950s and early 1960s to regulate the flow of the Wabash and protect the cities of Wabash, Logansport and Peru, as well as other downstream areas.

This week, the dam at Mississinewa was holding back flood waters even as work continued on a \$50 million project to repair and improve the structure.

Corps officials have been cautious to avoid placing too much water pressure on the dam during repairs, leaving a greater flood-control burden on other dams, Rager said.

With the greatest flooding so far occurring in the state's northern half, three other corps-managed dams to the south have not played a great role in controlling this week's high waters. Those dams are at Patoka and Monroe lakes in southern Indiana and Cagles Mill Lake east of Terre Haute.

Those projects could play a bigger role in coming days as the surge of flood waters heads down the Wabash. Heavy rains that fell across portions of southern and central Indiana on Wednesday also could complicate matters.